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MEET THE VINES

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“There’s so much good music that’s happening now, and we’re glad to be part of it, with bands like the Strokes and the White Stripes. I don’t think it’s a movement. It’s just real rock music.”

CRAIG NICHOLLS, THE VINES





Craig Nicholls has all the makings of a rock star: good looks, great songs, serious mental problems. Now if he can just live through the night

BY ROB SHEFFIELD
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN SCHOELLER

IDIDN'T BREAK ANYTHING," THE Vines' frontman, Craig Nicholls, mumbles. He's backstage at the Roxy in Los Angeles, trying to remember what he did last night. "I just remember all this glass. I started making pizza in the microwave around six in the morning. I was really hungry, and I was really out of it; I was hallucinating. Well, not hallucinating, but I didn't really eat. I didn't have any food for a long time before I went onstage. So I was hungry, and I remember there was all this glass. . . ."

His voice trails off and his blue eyes cloud over. "Uhhh, maybe I *did* break something."

He probably did. The Vines are at the tail end of their first extended journey through America, and the strain is showing. In the short time that they have been the toast of the rock world—six months that have seen the British press anoint them as the best band since Nirvana and their first album, *Highly Evolved*, debut at the top of the *Billboard* album chart—Nicholls has acquired a reputation as a weird little guy. He's become famous for locking himself in the bathroom for three hours before showtime, discussing suicide in interviews and kung-fu-kicking his bassist on the set of a U.K. TV show. At

twenty-four, Nicholls says he has already written hundreds of songs. He would rather spend his time in the studio than onstage, but he has spent the past month touring America. It has not helped the mess inside his head any.

Right now, the elfin space cadet sits on the dressing-room couch, writing up the night's set list—the same dozen or so songs every night, but always in a different order—consuming bong hits and Red Bull. "How many Red Bulls is too many?" he asks. "I've had two. It doesn't go too well with pot. I don't know if I



A strange
burning
sensation:
Rosser,
Griffiths,
Nicholls and
Matthews
(from left)

Waiting to inhale.
"Smoking is an
inspiration," says
Nicholls (bottom).
"It's good for me."



"I'm shy," says Nicholls.
"I didn't start speaking
until last year."

should have another." He shouldn't.

In the final minutes before the show, Nicholls starts feeling freaked out. You can tell because he gets up and paces, saying, "I'm freaked out." He retreats to a corner of the couch, bong in hand, and curls up into a ball. When one of the

roadies asks, "Are you OK to go on?" Nicholls tells him, "I don't know, man." The other Vines don't seem worried. They've heard all this before. A lot. Bassist Patrick Matthews, drummer Hamish Rosser and guitarist Ryan Griffiths drink Victoria beer and debate whether

to rip off their shirts onstage the way Nicholls does. "No way," Matthews says. "I'd need Botox in my gut." Nicholls still sits with his head in his hands.

An MC asks the crowd, "Are you ready to rock?" Nicholls lifts his head up and moans, "I am *not* ready to rock." He heads downstairs to rock anyway. The show is ferocious: Nicholls screams like a man possessed in Nirvana-style rave-ups such as "Get Free" and "Ain't No Room." In a crowd-pleasing version of OutKast's "Ms. Jackson," he sings the chorus over and over, like a psychedelic angel stuck between Australia and the Dirty South. For the final song, "Fuck the World," Nicholls smashes his guitar and jumps into the drum set. He tumbles in the debris, drums and cymbals spilling around

him; for the first time all day, he looks like he's having fun.

~ ~ ~

EVER SINCE THEY RELEASED THEIR DEBUT indie single in Australia last year, the superbly titled "Hot Leather/Sun Child," the Vines have been rocketing to the big time. Along with bands such as the Strokes, the White Stripes and the Hives, they've been acclaimed as leaders of a new modern-rock sound that blows away the bloated Korn-clone clichés of the past few years. In truth, none of these bands really has much in common with one another, but they all get lumped together because they show how rock fans across the world are starved for some new excitement and adrenaline, punk-rock style. Suddenly, the letter K and

fake DJs in baggy shorts are out; guitars, leather jackets and the silent E are in. As Griffiths says, "It's a miracle we've gotten through America without anybody introducing us as the Hives."

The Vines have garage-punk energy in their sound, but their real wellspring is Nicholls' grandiose imagination. What sets him apart is his ambition, his sense of mission. "I always knew we had it," Nicholls says. "I knew we could make a great album, if we put our heads together. We didn't put our heads together, but we made a great album anyway." He wants to be the next Kurt Cobain, and he wants it right now. He wanted *Highly Evolved* to be a double CD; he's impatient to head back into the studio and record the music he has inside him. He's often been heard to complain that the Beatles and Brian Wilson didn't have to go on tour, so why should he? (Never mind that the Beatles and Brian Wilson gave up touring after they'd already conquered the world.) "We want to make... hmmm... I think about twenty albums," Nicholls says. "Yeah, twenty. Sounds about right. I want to do it when I'm young and I have energy, because my energy's fading."

Hanging at a friend's bungalow in West Hollywood, absent-mindedly playing Radiohead's "The Tourist" over and over on his Epiphone acoustic guitar, Nicholls babbles amiably in the afternoon sun. He lounges in his Swervedriver T-shirt, under rat's-nest hair that looks like the rats were evacuated for their own protection. He's a friendly, funny guy, but he definitely fades in and out of his own world. Sometimes he zones out and can't finish his sentences; other times he falls asleep. When he's on a roll, he can ramble on wittily for minutes at a time. As the ancient proverb says, you can't steer a cat. "I've always been shy," Nicholls says. "I was a quiet child. I didn't start speaking until... uh, last year."

Maybe, just maybe, his demeanor has to do with the fact that he smokes an ungodly amount of pot. Nicholls carries his own bong around all day, wrapped in a plastic bag. He constantly packs the bong, lights up and slurps away. Forgetting his manners, he neglects to offer any to the hard-working journalist in the room. Spending time alone with him feels like baby-sitting my three-year-old nephew: I'm on guard, vigilant, watching to see that he doesn't hit his head on anything.

He's aware that his nut-case reputation precedes him. "I don't mind. It doesn't hurt me if anyone says I'm not normal. I don't know what normal is. Sometimes I'm just really tired, or I haven't eaten, and people get the wrong idea about me." The Vines hadn't toured much before this summer, and Nicholls is still getting used to performing. "Coming offstage is like going on a spaceship," he says, closing his eyes. "It's really far out. You're still kind of spent, in every sense of, you know, the existence thing. Heavy, man. I'm very dazed and confused when I come off. It's a good feeling. But I guess I'm kind of dazed and confused

even when I haven't just played."

Nicholls grew up in a suburb of Sydney, where his father works as an accountant for Sony Music. In the Sixties, Nicholls' father was in an Australian garage-rock band called the Vynes. "That's where I stole the name from," Nicholls says, stretching out on the floor. "They sounded like Elvis, I think." Nicholls' dad taught him his first guitar chords. It opened up a new world. "I was a loner, it's fair to say. I didn't drive a car, so I never socialized. I stayed at home and listened to music all day. Music became a mystical world for me."

Nicholls left school after tenth grade and did a six-month stint in art school before dropping out to work at McDonald's. "I was pretty slack. I just worked there to

get money to buy... that unnameable thing," he says, looking down at the crumbs of green all over the coffee table. While flipping Big Macs, he and fellow employee Patrick Matthews bonded over their love of music, especially American rockers such as Nirvana, Beck and Pavement. It was only a matter of time before they started a band. After Nicholls began writing songs, the group went into a local studio to cut a demo. "We spent a couple of days there and a few hundred dollars. When I heard it back on the headphones, that's when I quit McDonald's."

"Our next album will be a hundred times better," Nicholls announces, warming to his favorite topic. "We could go into the studio tomorrow and make another great

album. I wanna go in and do hundreds and hundreds of tracks - violins and cellos and everything. There's so much good music that's happening now, and we're glad to be part of it, with bands like the Strokes and the White Stripes. I don't think it's a movement. It's just real rock music." There's a pause, then the synapses fire up again. "I like to think music is a healing thing, a meditative thing."

This is a theme dear to his heart: the mind-altering, life-affirming power of music. But Nicholls gets freaked out dealing with the world outside of music - it's almost as though his connection to music is so intense he has to unplug the rest of the world. He hides behind that sweet, impassive, heavy-lidded grin of his, a beautiful

The Next Generation

All over the world, there's a garage-rock riot going on. Meet the troops coming to rock you next



They're hot, they're sexy and they're Swedes: Division of Laura Lee.

The Raveonettes

Denmark's answer to the White Stripes. The Raveonettes feature the Blondie-style boy-girl vocals of guitarist Sune Rose Wagner and bassist Sharin Foo and are already attracting major-label attention.

Why we love them: A truly fearsome live band, the Raveonettes motor away on massively loud guitar nuggets such as "Attack of the Ghost Riders" and "Cops on Our Tail."

Latest album: *Whip It On* (Crunchy Frog)

The Distillers

An L.A. power trio led by the ferocious Brody Armstrong, a twenty-two-year-old punk goddess from Melbourne, Australia. She's married to Rancid's Tim Armstrong, which

The Distillers: Forget your eye shadow, big man?

makes her half of the ranking punk-rock power couple.

Why we love them: Armstrong's songs are tough, funny and uncompromising bursts of feminist rage - at long last, Joe Strummer's wiseass kid sister.

Latest album: *Sing Sing Death House* (Hellcat)

Piebald

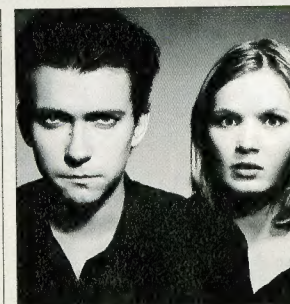
Hailing from the preppie boondocks of Andover, Massachusetts, Piebald must be the first band in history to actually describe itself as emo. They make loud, catchy and, above all, funny punk, with guitarist Travis Shettel rocking the one-liners. These four guys have been playing together since high school and made their first indie recordings in 1994.

Why we love them: How can you not like a band that does songs such as "Sex Sells and (Unfortunately) I'm Buying," "Rich People Can Breed," "Fear and Loathing on Cape Cod," and the self-explanatory "Look, I Just Don't Like You"?

Latest album: *We Are the Only Friends We Have* (Big Wheel Recreation)

Hot Snakes

A veritable indie-rock supergroup, Hot Snakes combine the talents of two mainstays of the



The Raveonettes: Sharin Foo (right), Sune Rose Wagner

San Diego punk scene: John Reis, frontman of Rocket From the Crypt, and Rick Froberg. They have played together before in Pitchfork and Drive Like Jehu, but this is their finest hour yet.

Why we love them: Mean, towering walls of sludge with zero emotional content but lots of bravado, summing up their range with songs such as "I Hate the Kids" and "Paid in Cigarettes."

Latest album: *Suicide Invoice* (Swami)

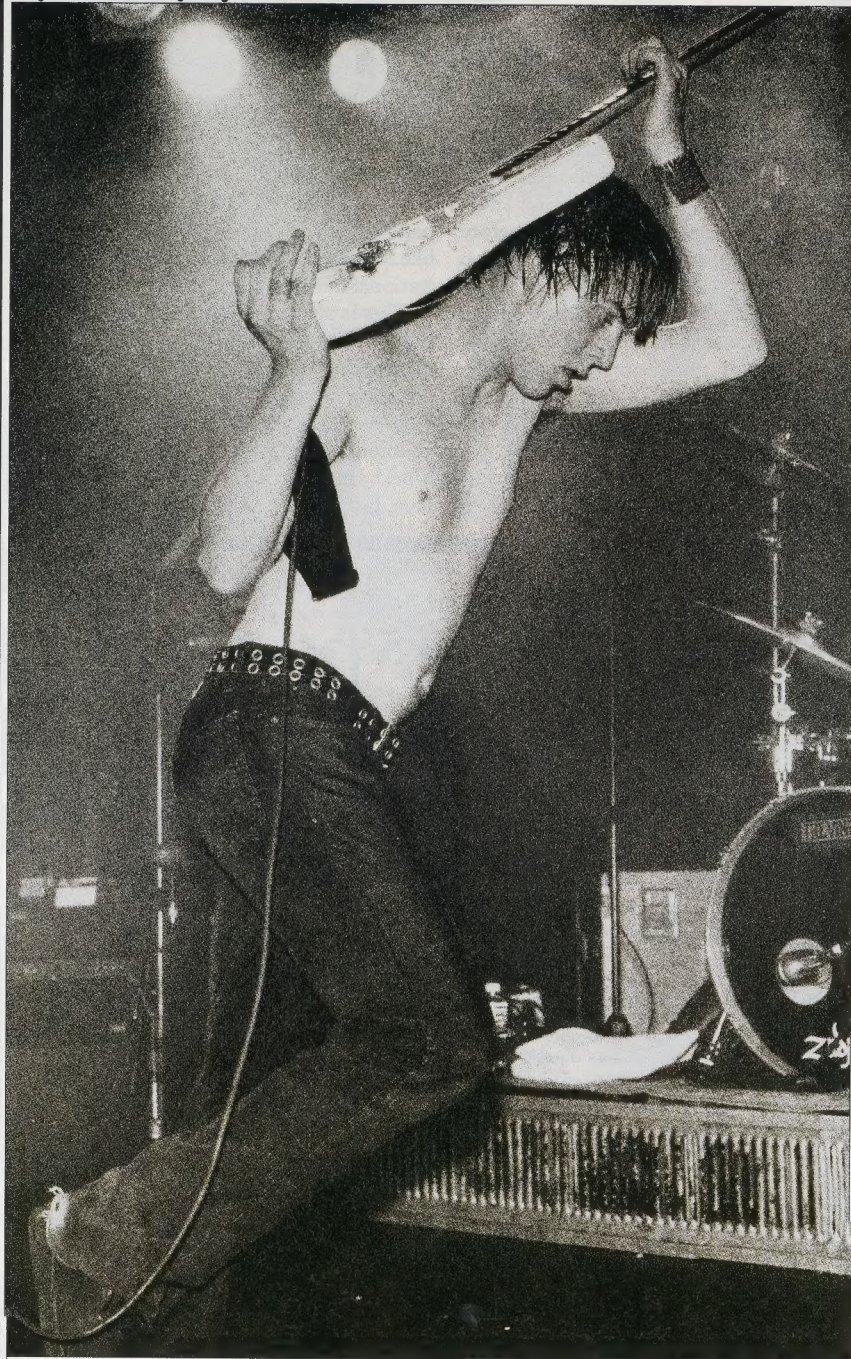
Division of Laura Lee

Hot on the heels of the Hives, Division of Laura Lee carry on the Swedish invasion. Jonas Gustafsson and Per Stålberg howl on the mike, but it's the garage guitars that grab your attention.

Why we love them: D.O.L.L. kick ass in anthems such as "Need to Get Some" and "The Truth Is Fucked" with a heavy dose of Detroit punk in the style of the Stooges and the MC5.

Latest album: *Black City* (Burning Heart) R.S.





“Craig’s mental,” says Matthews. “But he’s really inspiring.”

and coddled child of rock & roll fantasy, listening to the sounds inside his own head. Beyond music, he doesn’t have a lot of curiosity about the world. He watches a lot of TV on the bus, but he doesn’t remember much when it’s over. He plays a lot of Tony Hawk video games. He identifies with Shaggy from *Scooby-Doo* because he used to have a dog. Trying to think of a film that made an impression on him, he ponders in silence before coming up with David Spade’s *Joe Dirt*. He isn’t a big reader. He

has no interest in politics. What he really cares about, all he really cares about, is being a rock star. If not the new Kurt Cobain, he’s at least the new Evan Dando.

~ ~ ~

ONE OF THE CREW DUDES IS HOSTING AN end-of-tour celebration barbecue at his house in the Valley. Crowding around the backyard Weber kettle grill, as David Bowie’s *Aladdin Sane* blasts, the Vines point out that in real life, Australians do not say,

Nicholls onstage at the Roxy: He’d rather be an artist than a rock star. Good luck.

“Put another shrimp on the barbie.” “We don’t even call them shrimp,” Rosser says. “We call them prawns.” Matthews is drinking a self-devised tequila-and-beer concoction that would turn an ox’s stomach. When I tell him how much he looks like Pavement guitarist Scott Kannberg, he’s disappointed. “I thought you were gonna say Stephen Malkmus,” he says.

Matthews has a reputation as the normal one in the band, the nice guy who serves as a buffer between Nicholls and the insanity he generates. A serious lad and aspiring doctor who gave up med school for the Vines, he still reads medical textbooks on the road. “When I met him,” Matthews says of Nicholls, “I thought, ‘Well, he’s really good at music.’” But? “‘But’ didn’t happen until later. When we started to play shows and go on the road. That’s when I started to think, ‘Well, I probably could have picked out a better personality to spend a year with.’”

The *Highly Evolved* sessions were extremely fraught. The original trio of Matthews, Nicholls and drummer David Olliffe flew out to L.A. in July 2001 to record with producer Rob Schnapf, who’s worked with Beck, Elliott Smith and Foo Fighters. After two months of constant clashes, Olliffe flew back to Australia alone. “Craig and Dave were both seriously freaked out,” says Matthews. “I was the only one who could talk to either of them. But then I got Hamish in the band, and we became a little more stable.” Griffiths, the twenty-four-year-old Kurt Cobain look-alike from back home, joined later on guitar. “I’m Craig’s minder,” Matthews says. “It takes a lot of perseverance. But it’s not a tough job.” Matthews pauses and licks some of the salt on the rim of his pint glass. “Well, yeah, it is a tough job. He’s mental. But Craig’s really inspiring.”

~ ~ ~

NICHOLLS SAYS THE WORD “SERIOUS” A lot in conversation. He repeats the line “I don’t want to be a rock star, I want to be an artist” every time he gives an interview. The first few times I ask about his personal life, he just grins pleasantly, retreats back into his shell and mumbles about how serious the band is. But when I mention a rumor that Drew Barrymore is hosting an afterparty for the band (it never happens), he’s piqued enough to loosen up a little. “She’s dating one of the Strokes, isn’t she? I didn’t hear from Drew. Maybe next time.”

Does he have a girlfriend? “I guess I have a short attention span. I meet a lot of girls on the road. There’s so many people around. It’s hard to tell what’s going on. It’s hard enough to remember to pick up our clothes. Get our wallets out of the hotel. Love. It’s too hard. That’s why I listen to music.”

What do his friends back home in Sydney think of his success? “They probably think I



Hell’s bells: AC/DC in all their fury

Excellent Australians

The best music from Down Under – not counting Kylie

The Easybeats

This quintet of immigrants from Holland, England and Scotland was Australia’s answer to both the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, packing white R&B frenzy into knockout pop songs, mostly written by the group’s own Lennon and McCartney, guitarists Harry Vanda and George Young. **Greatest moment:** “Friday on My Mind” (1967)

AC/DC

Under the early studio guidance of Vanda and Young, this heavy-rock institution – founded in 1973 by George Young’s pint-size brothers, guitarists Angus and Malcolm – conquered the world with Chuck Berry chord changes fired up with Aussie-pub-brawl snarl and the wolf-in-suit heat of Bon Scott. **Essential boogie:** *Highway to Hell* (1979)

The Saints

The Saints went into a Brisbane studio in June 1976 – the same month the Ramones’ first LP came out – and cut the fierce, fast “(I’m) Stranded,” the song that jump-started Australia’s punk revolt, and one of the best singles of that era from any continent. **Killer album:** *(I’m) Stranded* (1977)

Midnight Oil

In 1986, the Oils – Australia’s answer to the Clash – went on a tour of aboriginal settlements in the red deserts and wetlands of the Northern Territory. The result was 1987’s *Diesel and Dust*, a dynamic collection of songs about the magnificent emptiness of central Australia and the endangered culture of its indigenous people. **Biggest U.S. hit:** “Beds Are Burning” (1988)

The Birthday Party

In their gothic-fire prime in early-1980s London, they were one of rock’s most amazing live bands, wrapping Nick Cave’s vocal sacrilege in magnificent chaos. **Finest noise:** *Live 1981-1982* (1999)

DAVID FRICKE

The Saints:
Australia’s
original punks





"No girl would come near me. I haven't showered in weeks."

smoke too much pot." Does he worry about smoking so much? "Smoking is an inspiration. It's good for me. It gives me focus. It's kind of spiritual. . . I don't really know what we're talking about. Oh, smoking. I wouldn't do it and drive a car, but I don't drive."

He sings about love a lot on the album. Has he ever been in love? "I think so. I think I fall in love about thirty times a day. Maybe more. I'm not sure. But yeah, I'm definitely in love. I love Tony Hawk. I love Coca-Cola. Maybe love is bad. Bad medicine, it's what I need. But if you ask me if I'm gonna

get married, I don't know. I could marry Natalie Imbruglia, but I'm too busy, and she's too busy, and she probably hates me. I would marry Meg White, but she wouldn't have me. I could marry Winona Ryder, but I'm sure I'd be too boring for her. I don't think she knows who I am, and I don't think I could hold her attention span.

"I don't have a girlfriend at the moment, but then I don't have time. At the moment, I don't think a girl would come near me because I haven't showered in weeks. I'm gonna get that worked out. Women respect a man who can wash himself."

~ ~ ~

BEFORE THEIR FINAL SHOW, THE VINES grab dinner at the Rainbow, where we stop after I mention it's featured in the

Guns n' Roses video for "November Rain." Nicholls orders fettuccine alfredo, probably because he enjoys saying the name out loud repeatedly. He hardly eats any of it, though, and halfway through dinner, he abruptly gets up and disappears. Nobody seems concerned. He turns up later backstage, flipping through a French rock magazine that somebody left behind. "You can't read French talk," he complains. "It's too hard." A roadie comes in and checks on Nicholls' bong. "We really should change the water," the roadie says. "I'll get somebody on that." Nicholls shuffles into the bathroom and changes the water himself.

There is much dressing-room merriment over a rumor that Wes Scantlin from Puddle of Mudd tried to get backstage last night but couldn't convince the bouncer who he was. "We've pissed off Puddle of Mudd then, and he'll tell Fred Durst," Matthews says. "No invites to the Playboy mansion." Rosser goes into overdrive: "Let's see, Miss April for Ryan and Miss December for Patrick. Oh, and Craig? Miss March through November for you." Nicholls isn't listening. It's showtime. Sacked out on the couch just a few minutes ago, now he's already hopping up and down in the doorway. "Come on," he says. "Let's get out there!"

Nicholls collects his thoughts before going out to face his bong.

After the show, the backstage scene is euphoric. "We had a proper drum-kit trashing tonight!" Rosser says. With a flourish, Griffiths rolls up a dollar bill, tucks it into the bong and lights up. He and Matthews smoke hits of the burning cash. But as a crowd gathers, Nicholls curls back up into a ball on the far corner of the couch. He hides from the girls jockeying for position. Every Jane in the room is giving him the thermometer, one way or another. One plants her hands on his shoulders, stares into his eyes and recites some of her poetry. He says nothing, just gives his blank smile until she goes away. A blond Ukrainian model with pupils the size of golf balls goes around asking the band members to autograph the banana she's carrying. Here in L.A., the world capital of weird sceneries and rock hustlers and hangers-on, the dressing room buzzes with activity. But right now, Nicholls just keeps hiding in the corner behind his lopsided grin, tuning in to the music inside his head.

Rob Sheffield wrote "Rock's Fifty Greatest Meltdowns" in RS 904.

more vines

Exclusive interviews, live photos and video at rollingstone.com/vines